



Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Expansion Study

Planning Update #4, June 2004

Greetings

This is the fourth planning update from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, intended to keep you informed and involved in the planning process for the proposed expansion of the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area in Merced County, California.

We would like to hear from you. Your input is very important. It helps us gather information and identify issues affecting you, your community, and the natural resources of the Grasslands area.

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Land Protection Planning Documents Available

Since establishment of the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in 1979, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has worked with landowners to successfully manage their lands to benefit wildlife and contribute to the recovery of migratory waterfowl populations under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Properties within the WMA remain as privately-owned land protected by conservation easements. Daily management of the easement area remains under private landowner control, with the majority of the properties being managed for cattle grazing, wildlife friendly agriculture, and waterfowl hunting.

Due to the participation of these landowners and the overwhelming success of the voluntary easement program, the Service, in 1998, proposed to expand the Grasslands WMA by 15,000 acres. As a result of public outreach, the Service received comments from landowners; the general public; state, county, and local governments; and other interest groups which recommended a more contiguous area for expansion. Based on this input, the Service conducted a more detailed study of the habitats that exist in the area to determine if these lands could help achieve the Service’s wildlife management objectives. As a result of this analysis, the Service enlarged the study area for expansion of the WMA boundary from 15,000 acres to approximately 49,000 acres (see map).

The Service has prepared an Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan for the proposed expansion of the Grasslands WMA, the contents of which are summarized in this planning update. These documents will be available for review and comment; all comments should be received by July 30, 2004. Please see page 6 for details on how you can review these documents.

Public Open House - June 21, 2004

The Service will host a public open house in Merced, June 21, 2004, to accept comments on its proposal to expand the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area in Merced County.

The meeting will be held in the University of California Cooperative Extension Classroom at the Merced County Agricultural Center, 2135 Wardrobe Ave., from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.



Long-billed curlew, USFWS



Godwit, USFWS

Why Propose an Expansion?

The grasslands of central Merced County support a diversity of wildlife habitats including declining native California grasslands, rare vernal pools, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and remnant riparian habitat along a network of sloughs and creeks. These habitats support large wintering populations of migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, sandhill cranes, and federally listed threatened and endangered species including four species of freshwater crustacea, San Joaquin kit fox, and blunt-nosed leopard lizard. The Service established the Grasslands WMA in 1979, to protect habitat for migratory and resident wildlife.

Conversion of California's valuable pasture land and wildlife habitat has, however, accelerated, reducing the amount of available habitat for migrating and overwintering waterbirds, and threatening the existence of many rare and declining San Joaquin wildlife species. Grazing land and seasonal wetlands (vernal pools) to the east of the existing Wildlife Management Area have been identified as an area important to many Pacific Flyway migratory birds and essential to the recovery of threatened and endangered species. In an effort to assist with further protection of important wildlife habitat in central Merced County, the Service is proposing to expand the existing conservation easement program by expanding the Grasslands WMA project area.

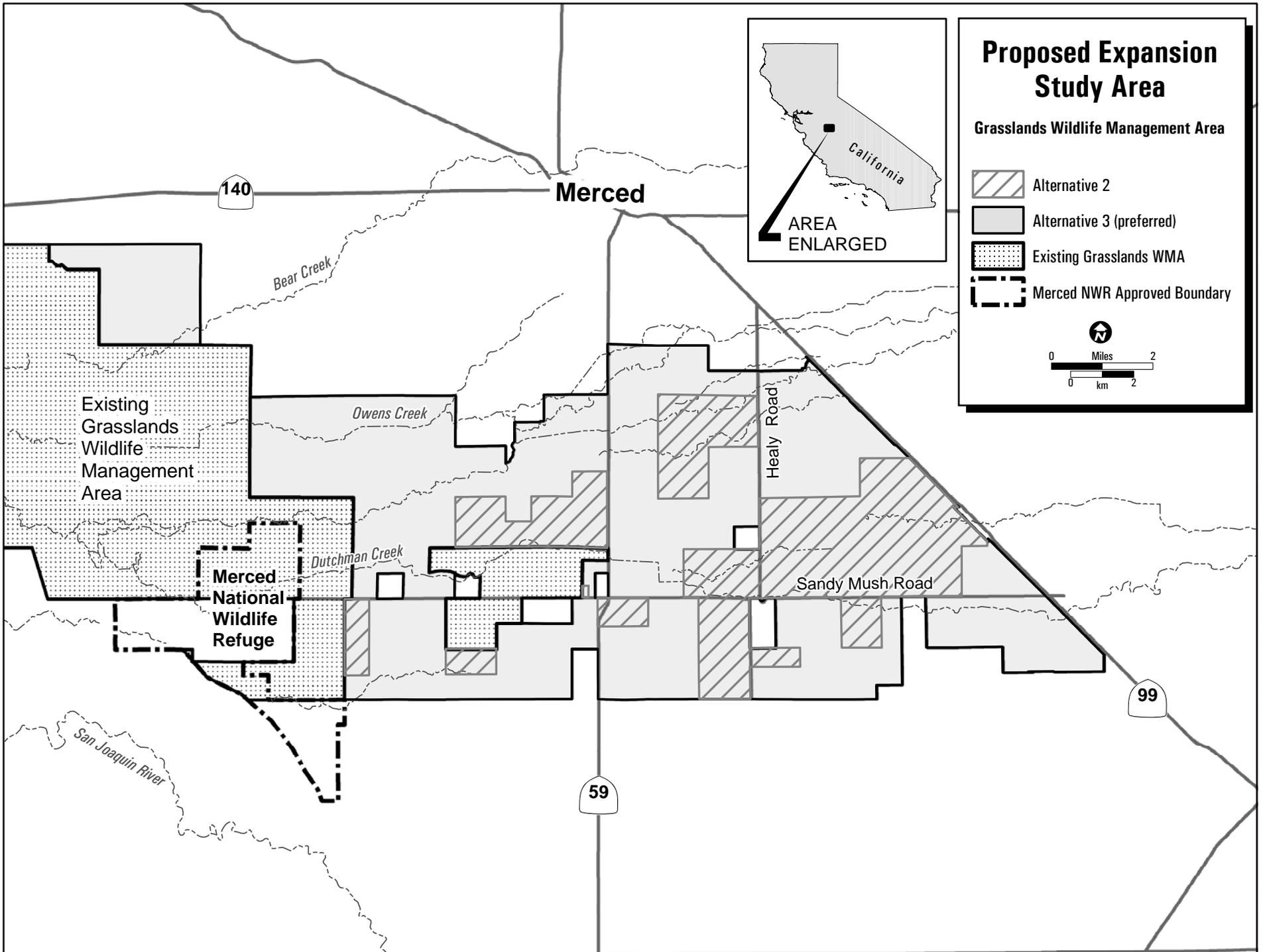
What is the Purpose of the Proposed Expansion?

- Expand protection and management of the existing Grasslands WMA to include key habitats for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, migratory birds, sandhill cranes, and several endangered, threatened, and rare species.
- Maintain the high biological diversity of Merced County's native grasslands and vernal pools.
- Establish a wildlife corridor across a portion of California's Central Valley.

What Would Expansion Mean to Landowners?

For landowners whose property is within the proposed expansion study area, expansion of the Grasslands WMA would provide an opportunity to sell a conservation easement to the Service, on a willing seller basis, at fair market value, while preserving important wildlife habitat and California's open space and agricultural and rural life style.

Landowners who do not wish to participate in the program are under no obligation to participate.



Summary of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Alternative 1 - No Action

The No Action Alternative represents no change from existing land management in the study area. Under this alternative, the Service would not acquire interests in lands for the purpose of expanding the Grasslands WMA. It is likely that crop land conversion would continue to occur without landowner incentives to preserve the land's inherent wildlife use capability. If existing habitats are not protected from conversion or development, waterfowl and shorebirds could be forced into other areas and/or concentrate in increasingly crowded conditions, which, when combined with poor habitat quality and adverse weather conditions, have contributed to the spread of disease. Without protection, native and wildlife friendly habitats are likely to become highly fragmented. A landscape of small, isolated islands of habitats would further compromise the long-term survival of wildlife species in the Grasslands ecosystem.



Sandhill Crane, USFWS

Alternative 2 - 13,800-Acre WMA Addition

Under Alternative 2, the Service would expand the approved WMA boundary by approximately 13,800 acres—from approximately 36,550 acres to 50,350 acres—and seek to protect wildlife and native habitats through acquisition of native grassland and wetlands (see map). Under this alternative, the Service would seek habitat protection through conservation easements. With the protection of additional native grasslands and vernal pool habitat the Service would also be contributing to protection and recovery of migratory waterfowl populations, shorebirds and landbirds of North America's Pacific Flyway, and federally listed threatened and endangered species.

Alternative 3 - 49,000-Acre WMA Addition (Proposed Action)

Alternative 3 includes lands identified in Alternatives 2, plus 34,680 acres including wildlife compatible crop lands, pasture lands, and local creeks and sloughs (see map). These additional lands would increase protection to vernal pools and native grasslands by connecting the large blocks of grasslands and vernal pools included in Alternative 2, and providing a contiguous corridor for wildlife migration across the study area. Creeks and sloughs have been included in this alternative, and opportunities for riparian restorations are expected to become available. Farming with wildlife compatible crops would be supported with this alternative.



San Joaquin Kit Fox, USFWS

Alternatives Considered but Found Not Feasible

Some land protection proposals considered during the scoping process were found not feasible. These proposals included:

- Requests to include properties substantially outside the project study area.
- Fee acquisition of the lands on a willing seller basis.
- Using a variation of Alternative 2 but incorporating only lands with streams.

They are not feasible because: lands too far from the project area would not satisfy the need for a contiguous, biologically intact area that provides connectivity and avoids fragmentation; fee acquisition would prove to be too costly; and including only lands with streams and excluding other important habitats would not meet the purpose and need for the project.

What is the Land Protection Planning Process?

The Service initiates the land protection planning process to study habitat protection proposals. Proposals must demonstrate that adding habitat or lands to a Wildlife Management Area, which is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, is the best way to achieve protection. The process is then carried out as follows.

- The planning process integrates three components—detailed study and planning, extensive public involvement, and environmental compliance.
- The documentation that evolves from the process includes an Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan.
- The Environmental Assessment will evaluate the potential effects each alternative would have on the physical, biological, social and economic environment.
- The Land Protection Plan will identify the proposed WMA expansion boundary and the tracts of land within the expanded boundary, and prioritize the tracts of land based on habitat values.
- The Conceptual Management Plan will describe the potential management activities being considered under the Grasslands WMA conservation easement program.
- These draft documents will be available to the public for review and comment to ensure that the interested public is informed about Service proposals. Comments are considered in final documents.
- Based on the WMA boundary alternatives presented in the final documents, Service decision-makers choose an appropriate course of action. The alternatives can range from no action to including all or part of the study area lands within a WMA boundary.
- If part or all of the lands are approved for inclusion, an expanded WMA boundary would be established and the planning process would be complete.

An expanded WMA boundary defines an area where the Service can acquire conservation easements. It is Service policy to acquire easements only from landowners who are willing sellers. Acquisitions are subject to funding availability. If the proposed WMA expansion is approved, the Service's Realty Division can begin working with landowners on easement terms.

What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of public lands set aside specifically for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants. More than 540 refuges have been established from the Arctic Ocean to the South Pacific, from Maine to the Caribbean. This system of lands encompasses more than 95 million acres of land and water and at least one national wildlife refuge can be found in every state.

Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Land Protection Planning Study Schedule

<u>Planning Step</u>	<u>Target Date</u>
Planning Update 1 Issued	Completed
Public Workshop	Completed
Planning Update 2 Issued	Completed
Planning Update 3 Issued	Completed
Planning Update 4 Issued	Completed
Draft Documents Released and Public Comment Period Begins*	June 2004
Public Meeting/Open House	June 21, 2004
Public Comment Period Ends	July 30, 2004
Final Documents and Notice of Decision released by	Fall 2004

**Public comment period dates to be announced
Dates are tentative and can change as the study progresses.*

How Do I Review the Planning Documents?

Contact the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge to receive a copy of the Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan, or view or download them from the Service's website at <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning>. These planning documents are also available for review at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge (see address on last page) and the libraries listed below.

Merced County Library
2100 O Street
Merced, CA 95340

Merced County Library
Los Banos Branch
1312 7th Street
Los Banos, CA 93635



**For information on the
Grasslands WMA contact:**

Kim Forrest, Refuge Manager or
Loren Ruport, Wildlife Biologist
San Luis NWR Complex
P.O. Box 2176
947 West Pacheco Blvd.
Los Banos, CA 93635
Phone: 209 826-3508

**For Information on Easement
Acquisitions Contact:**

Stephen Dyer, Chief
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Sacramento Realty Field Office
2800 Cottage Way, Rm. W-2610
Sacramento, CA 95825-1846
Phone: 916 414-6445
Fax: 916 414-6462

How Do I Provide Comments?

We would like to hear your ideas and discuss them at the upcoming Open House. If you cannot attend, but still wish to share your ideas, concerns, and questions. Please send written comments to Richard Smith as follows:

... via mail: Richard Smith, Natural Resource Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
CA/NV Refuge Planning
2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-1916
Sacramento, California 95825

..... fax: 916 414-6512

...or e-mail: FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
(Please refer to "Grasslands" in the subject line.)

Richard can also provide information on the planning process; call him at 916 414-6502, if you have any questions.

Comments are due to Richard, July 30, 2004



U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Attn: NWRS/RPL
911 NE 11th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232-4181

Address correction requested